STAT

A Republican Reversal on Nicaragua

By JOEL BRINKLEY Special to The New York Time

WASHINGTON, April 10 - Even before most people knew what was really going on in Nicaragua, Senator John H. Chafee supported President

Reagan's policy there.

The Central Intelligence Agency's mining of Nicaragua's harbors, the guerrilla warfare manual advising Nicaraguan rebels on political assassination, the charges that the American-backed rebels were torturing and murdering numerous unarmed civilians - none of that provoked Mr. Chafee, a Rhode Island Republican, to change his vote.

But no more. Mr. Reagan has finally lost that vote. An analysis of how Mr. Chafee reached that decision may help explain why the White House concluded that it probably could not persuade Congress to renew aid to the rebels without accompanying the request with a new Central American proposal.

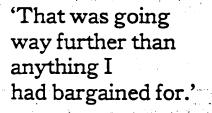
New Proposal on April 4

That move, made April 4, proposed making further aid to the rebels nonmilitary, providing the governing Sandinstas would agree to negotiate with the rebels.

But even that may not swing the issue for Mr. Reagan if Mr. Chafee's reaction is typical. He says he was not

As the Senator sees things, it is not he who has changed position. Rather, he contends, it is the Administration.

As evidence, he cites Mr. Reagan's



"watershed" news conference on Feb. 21. Mr. Reagan said then his goal in Central America was to "re-move" the present Nicaraguan Gov-ernment unless "they'd say uncle."

White House Amends It

"That was going way further than anything I had bargained for," Mr. Chafee said, explaining his change of heart. "I don't care what kind of government Nicaragua has, as long as they leave their neighbors alone."

Until then, the Senator added, each time Mr. Reagan had come close to



Senator John H. Chafee

saying he supported overthrowing the Nicaraguan Government, someone at the White House had come forward and explained "that's not what he really meant." But not after Feb. 21, at least not as far as Mr. Chafee could

As a result, he said, he had no intention of returning to Mr. Reagan's side on the Nicaragua issue. Nor was he impressed, he added, by the President's offer last week.

Why is Chaffee position important?

The Margin Is Narrow

The last time the Senate voted on aid to the rebels, the White House won by four votes. Since then, Senator Dave Durenberger, a Minnesota Republican, has indicated that he would vote no if asked again. Meanwhile, the elections in November gave the Democrats two additional seats in the

It may be that some opponents have changed their view as a result of Mr. Reagan's call for negotiations. Still, it is clear that every vote counts.

Further, Mr. Chafee is in many ways a key Senator on the Central America. He was a member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence for eight years until January. That meant he had the opportunity to read even the most secret intelligence information about the rebel program.

He is generally described as a mod-

erate Republican. That means the White House cannot count on his vote on every issue, and it must be worked

Mr. Chafee said he initially had no difficulty supporting the Administration's rationale, that the rebels could be used to intercept arms shipments going from Nicaragua to El Salvador's insurgents.

"Then they broadened it," he said. "saying the rebels were to be a burr in the Sandinistas' saddle, to encourage them to participate in peace talks. I thought, well, O.K. It was a little fuzzy but clearly had nothing to do with overthrowing the Government.'

Last spring, when the Central Intelligence Agency was implicated in the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, the Senator began to have doubts but continued to back Mr. Reagan.

The Guerrilia Manual

Last fall, when the intelligence agency acknowledged it had been re-sponsible for a guerrilla warfare manual advising the rebels to "neutralize" selected Sandinista officials and to blackmail ordinary Nicaraguan to join the rebel cause, he took note. But, "Frankly it didn't bother

me very much." he says.
This year, when several private organizations published reports charging the rebels with widespread atrocities, far in excess of what might be expected in war, the Senator "didn't like" the implications of the reports but his mind was not changed. "It's

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very hard to confirm or deny that it is

really going on," he explained.
In all, Mr. Chafee said, he believed
the C.l.A. and the rebel program, despite problems, were "serving a useful purpose" in Nicaragua, right up to

"I fell off the bandwagon," the Senator said. And now that he has made his intentions known, he added, he cannot be persuaded to change his mind again. "This wasn't just a flash decision," he said. "I have thought this thing through."

The big unanswered question is how many other legislators are thinking on the same lines. STAT